

Address to the Jan Smuts Memorial Service 22 May 2022

Chairman of the Board Brandon Topham

Members of the Board

Members of the Smuts Family, with special acknowledgment of my cousin Councillor Lynda Shackelford from that big metropolis south of the Boerewors Curtain. Lynda is the second family politician in four generations. Proud of you Cuz!

Distinguished Guests

It gives me particular pleasure to be addressing you today, as this is likely my last Smuts Memorial Service, which I think is either the 52nd or 53rd one I've attended.

With the plague enforced break of what was Ops Normal, the General Smuts Foundation has most appropriately seen fit to remember the involvement of Jan Smuts' in the formation of the South African Air Force. The SAAF turned 100 on 1 February 2020, the celebration of which extremely significant event was sadly well short of hopes and expectations due to the onset of the plague as well as political interference from one person in particular, not a member of the Air Force, who was steadfast in his determination that the SAAF only came into being in 1994. I should state that I've known every Chief of the South African Air Force for the past 48 years personally and without exception they acknowledged fully the primary role Jan Smuts played in the creation of the SAAF.

For clarity, I refer to Jan Smuts as "Oubaas" which is how the Smuts family, even Ouma, referred to him.

For me to relate the role of the Oubaas in the establishment of the South African Air Force I need first to explain how the oldest independent Air Force in existence and which my late father called 'The elder family Air Force, the Royal Air Force, came into being.

In 1917 England had two Air Services, the Royal Flying Corps, in effect an Army air wing and the Royal Navy Air Service with the Royal Flying Corps occupying itself with matters on the Western Front, while the Royal Naval Air Service concentrated on the Channel. To complicate further an already complex situation, the "Army and Navy had on order "9483 aircraft of 76 varieties and 20000 engines of 76 kinds".

After having delivered a report to Parliament on 18 July 1917 regarding the air defences of British cities against German bombing raids, the Oubaas delivered a second report on 17 August which Air Vice Marshal Tony Mason in 1986 referred to as "the single most important document in the history of air power".

In this second report, the Oubaas suggested that air power should have an offensive role, not just a defensive one as was the practice at the time. Due to the ground breaking nature of what he was suggesting, the Oubaas drew a parallel with the role

of artillery, saying that "artillery was a weapon, an instrument ancillary to a service, but one that could not be an independent service itself".

He went on to elaborate:

"Air Service on the contrary, can be used as an independent means of war operations far from and independently of, both Army and Navy. As far as can be presently foreseen there is absolutely no limit to the scale of its future independent war use. And the day might not be far off when aerial operations with their devastation of enemy lands and destruction of industrial and populous centres on a vast scale may become the principle operations of war to which the older forms of military and naval operations may become secondary and subordinate. In our opinion there is no reason why the Air Board should any longer continue in its present form and there is every reason why it should be raised to the status of an independent Ministry in control of its own war service"

This, Ladies and Gentlemen, was the seed from which the oldest independent Air Force, the Royal Air Force, was born. There seems often to be some confusion as to the respective roles played by the Oubaas and Lord Trenchard in the establishment of the RAF. My personal, much simplified, explanation is that the Oubaas conceived the establishment of a third independent arm of service, persuaded Parliament that this was worthy idea, gave birth to the RAF and shortly after birth the infant air force was given up for adoption. It is interesting also to note that when the Oubaas delivered his report to Parliament on 17 August, Gen Trenchard who is sometimes regarded as the Father of the Royal Air Force was in France, and when news was received that Parliament had voted for the establishment of an independent air force, voiced his strong disapproval. This personal, likely somewhat subjective explanation of events, was not disputed by the Third Viscount Trenchard when I shared my thoughts with him some years ago.

It also did no harm that the Oubaas was also the attending paediatrician to the infant air force as he was at the time Chairman of the War Priorities Committee which was empowered to determine and coordinate how all materials, both raw and processed, were best employed in the war effort. Of interest is that the apportionment of all material between the various arms of service and support functions was almost exclusively done by the Oubaas, manually, in long hand, and with considerable mental arithmetic and astonishing brilliance. The late Col Charles Comley once explained what an extraordinary exercise in sheer intellect this was, today super computers are employed for this task.

Having pioneered the concept of air power, and got the Royal Air Force off the ground, it followed that the Oubaas would wish to have the same happen in his own country.

South African had featured strongly in the Royal Flying Corps during World War I, with Andrew Beauchamp-Proctor topping the heap with the most kills amongst all the Empire's airmen, 41, and holder of the VC, MC, DSO and DFC. Amongst his contemporaries was one Colonel Helder van Ryneveld, who was to play a significant role in the establishment of our own South African Air Force. He was not the most successful fighter pilot with only 5 kills, and was known to be cold, ambitious, decisive, authoritarian, took criticism with poor grace, but was inspirational and that rarest of men, a leader of leaders. When the Oubaas decided to start an air force in South Africa, Sir Pierre was the man he chose to make it happen.

Sir Pierre was better known amongst the South African public for an epic flight he undertook with Quinton Brand from England to South Africa in a Vickers Vimy called the Silver Queen. Despite two crashes, and Smuts having to authorise two replacement aircraft, they succeeded in their endeavours and both were knighted.

The South African Air Force got off to a flying start with the Imperial Gift. The Imperial Gift was according to Carel Birkby a personal gift from the War Cabinet to the Oubaas, who he describes as one of its most forceful members. Officially the gift was for 100 aircraft, comprising 22 SE 5A's, 30 Avro 504 Trainers, and 48 DH9 bombers. These were augmented by gifts of 10 DH 4's from the London Overseas Club as well as a DH 9 and two BE 2 Scouts from the City of Birmingham. Apart from the aircraft, the gift included steel frames for 20 hangars, 30 wood and canvas hangars, 50 000 gallons of aero fuel and 20 000 gallons of paint, varnish and dope. A complete engine shop as well as motor vehicles and photographic equipment were also included.

Sir Pierre was summoned from Cologne in Germany where he was engaged in the handover of surrendered German aircraft to the RAF to the Savoy Hotel in London where the Oubaas kept residence and was told "I want you to go out to South Africa and start an air force"

Sir Pierre supervised the shipment of the gift to Cape Town which cost £32 800, where it was offloaded and railed to Pretoria at a cost of £38 300.

The Imperial Gift consignment was transported to a 23,5 morgen site some 2 miles east of Roberts Heights which had been purchased to become the SAAF's first airfield. This airfield was named Swartkop, and is still active today, in fact some of the Imperial Gift Hangars are amazingly still in daily use. AFB Swartkop is the oldest active Air Force Base in the world.

The South African Air Force was officially established on 1 February 1920, a day that is still celebrated each year. Ours is thus the second oldest independent air force in the world.

With the current starvation of adequate funding for the Department of Defence due to wholesale looting of state assets and theft of state resources there is frequent criticism of my Air Force. Being involved with the SAAF at all levels, permit me to say that while the SAAF operates on what is in effect a shoestring budget there is no shortage of passion and determination amongst SAAF members to fulfil their mandate, and in this I include everyone from the current Chief, General Mbambo to the newest recruit.

The SAAF remains a passion of mine and I will always regard it with great pride.

Last but not one Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish to read two quotes which reflect two very different aspects of the Oubaas.

The first is a quote from Winston Churchill made in 1917 when Prime Minister Louis Botha sent the Oubaas to London to attend the Imperial Conference:

"At this moment there arrives in England from the outer marches of the Empire a new and altogether extraordinary man. The stormy and hazardous roads he has travelled by would fill all the sets and scenes of a drama" Churchill and the Oubaas would become close personal friends.

The second quote comes from Kathleen Mincher, the Oubaas' granddaughter from her wonderful book "I lived in his shadow".

"His love and enjoyment of children knew no bounds. With them he could relax completely, his faith in mankind was renewed in their company and he came away from his games with them refreshed and reborn. He himself was in so many ways childlike, uninhibited and without malice."

And finally a quote from the book "Ouma Smuts" by Tom MacDonald which wraps up an international perspective of the Oubaas:

"Though Churchill was at the epicentre of world events and led an active life, yet he lacked the academic experience and disposition that Smuts so singularly enjoyed; though Gandhi had perhaps a more substantial and subtle philosophical and contemplative preparation, his life kept him apart from strenuous physical and military experience; though Wilson was steeped in academic, religious and political experience, he too had little direct contact with general population through military and similar exploits, and projected an uninspiring eremitical mien. Smuts, more than any of his contemporaries in world affairs, seems to have been the "whole man".

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you for your indulgence, in particular that of my friend Wing Commander Bruce Harrison who has heard most of what I said here on more occasions than could be realistically expected.

